

means rather that '*Verständnis*' is a logical side of any actual *verstehen* itself, as far as the latter is contrasted to the possibility of *Unverständnis*: that is to say, to be out of the game of *verstehen* as to what is at stake, due to lack of practice.

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## Understanding, Understanding Oneself, Self-Understanding

### Hermeneutic Considerations Proceeding from Wilhelm Dilthey

**Abstract:** Wilhelm Dilthey defines the specific nature of understanding utilizing two aspects: on the one hand, understanding is a comprehension of connections, typically regarding the relation between a whole and its parts. Understanding captures the meaning of something according to this relation: We understand an episode from its function within a story, a text from its words and sentences. On the other hand, understanding consists of understanding something as an expression. We understand cultural and historical facts as objectifications of individual and social life. The triad life-expression-understanding forms the structural framework of hermeneutics. Eventually, understanding implies self-understanding. Therefore autobiography, for Dilthey, is the paradigm of understanding.

**Keywords:** understanding, understanding oneself, explaining, reference, autobiography

## 1 Understanding and Explaining

"Nature we explain, the mind we understand."<sup>1</sup> Thus Wilhelm Dilthey – as do other neo-Kantian philosophers – characterises the difference between the human and the natural sciences in his 1894 *Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology*. The accentuation of the concept of understanding makes clear that Dilthey does not use it in the ordinary, common- sensically broad sense. In such a broad sense, understanding means grasping relations of any kind, in various domains of reality. Here, the concepts of understanding and explaining have overlapping scopes – they do not stand in opposition to one another. Dilthey obviously has a narrower concept of understanding in mind, where understanding aims at mental or 'inner' things and proceeds from their innermost core, such as a motivation or an intention. This conception of understanding is often associated with certain cognitive acts, such as empathising with another or putting

<sup>1</sup> Dilthey, 1990, 139–240, here p. 144; Dilthey, 2010, 115–210.

oneself in another's shoes, but is also dismissed in philosophy of science.<sup>2</sup> In many contexts, we are familiar with speaking of genuine understanding that comprehends the sense of its object rather than merely registering or classifying it. Equally, the aforementioned differentiation of methods has remained up to the present in manifold variations, e.g. in opposing phenomenological and empirical description, internal and external perspective, or quantitative and qualitative analyses, and in the debate concerning the naturalisation of the mind. We owe a systematically elaborated position in exploring this terrain to Wilhelm Dilthey.

In his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* from 1883,<sup>3</sup> Dilthey decisively articulates the project of re-establishing the human sciences, aiming at liberating them both from their "old subservience to metaphysics" and their "new subordination to the natural science".<sup>4</sup> Pivotal elements of this foundation are the "inner experience" and the "facts of consciousness". Its point of reference, however, is not the abstract intellect and its functions, but the whole human being as "this willing, feeling, representing being"; not "mere representation", but "life".<sup>5</sup> Thus, Dilthey's re-foundational project marks a significant shift away from established epistemology. In *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Dilthey systematically carries out the foundation he has announced in the *Introduction*, at the same time postulating an emphatic concept of understanding that considers understanding not as an isolated intellectual operation, but as being intimately coupled with life. The "connection of life, expression and understanding" constitutes the structural core of the human sciences: facts about the historical and cultural world are its object "insofar as [therein] human states are being experienced, become manifest in articulations of life, and insofar as these expressions are understood."<sup>6</sup> Explicating the act of understanding in its specific logic and systematic significance must proceed from this structure.

## 2 Internal Perspective and Reference to the Subject

Understanding something – in contrast to merely noticing and describing it from an external perspective – means engaging with the internal perspective of that which is

<sup>2</sup> The *locus classicus* being Abel, 1948, 211–218.

<sup>3</sup> Dilthey, 1966, XVII. English: Dilthey, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Dilthey, 1966, XV.

<sup>5</sup> Dilthey, 1966, XVII–XIX.

<sup>6</sup> Dilthey, 1970, English: Dilthey, 2010a, *Works III*. Page numbers in the following text refer to the German edition.

to be understood. Paradigmatically, it means understanding something as a subject's expression or utterance. The utterance can be a report by which the subject wants to give a piece of information. Here, it is possible to ask what the subject 'means', what the utterance – or the subject, respectively – 'intends to say'. But the utterance can be made without an intention to give a piece of information; it can articulate a wish, an intention, a mood, whose manifestation thus becomes the utterance itself. In each case, understanding means grasping the utterance from the wishing, intending, or acting subject's perspective. Understanding means comprehending which action someone performs with a particular instance of behaviour, with a certain movement of his body. Understanding involves a fundamentally reflexive approach to its object insofar as it accounts for the sense the utterance has for its subject.

Yet, understanding does not imply referring to the subject's conscious intention. It is possible that the subject expresses or communicates something to others without being aware of it, much less being able to name it. His intention can be unclear to himself, he can be wrong about what he expresses, or even about what he means or actually wants. In extreme cases, such as understanding an ideologically biased subject or a pathological symptom, an act of understanding retains reservations concerning what the acting and speaking subject means. This kind of understanding is the topic of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. But also in the 'ordinary' case, understanding cannot simply rely on the subject's manifest intention. The author's intention is not the ultimate yardstick for substantially interpreting a text. More generally, the acting and speaking subject confronts the problem of becoming clear about what his utterance ought to express prior to making an utterance with a definite sense. Utterances equally serve to clarify one's own thoughts and doings as they serve to communicate the result. The purpose of looking for the right expression, that is, does not only consist in finding the right way of putting one's thoughts into words or one's intentions into action, but first and foremost in shaping one's thoughts and intentions with clarity and precision. Understanding must take an utterance's provisional character into account insofar as it aims at disclosing what the subject really means or wants. Nonetheless, understanding in this case, too, means grasping the sense an utterance has in principle for the subject and from the subject's point of view, i.e. even if the subject himself is not entirely clear about that very sense.

In a broader sense, this model of understanding also applies to understanding artefacts, cultural practices, and institutions. Identifying a convention as a graduation ceremony, conceiving an instance of handshaking as a greeting or agreement, amounts to grasping the respective meanings of these events. Describing them adequately must account for their self-description, i.e. the way in which the subjects who are involved in the practice at issue, concerned by a story or operating with a certain object, would themselves describe their doings. Although this self-description

can be disputable or false, it ontologically belongs to the object of understanding, and understanding the object covers more than registering its objectively measurable characteristics. It equally covers grasping the object's being embedded in functional connections to acting, suffering and expressing subjects. As a minimal condition, understanding comprises grasping objects within a subject's spaces of experience, action and resonance with reference to the subject himself. This is what distinguishes understanding from non-understanding descriptions most broadly.

This minimal condition, however, does not specify as to what understanding itself, as a cognitive operation, is, how this operation 'works', what enables it to grasp its object, and what it is in which its genuine capacity of disclosing consists.

### 3 Understanding as Understanding Connections

We can approach an answer to these questions by drawing on conceptions explicating understanding not primarily in terms of relevance to the subject, but in terms of objectively obtaining relations. As a minimal definition along these lines, understanding means grasping a connection. Understanding primarily and genuinely understands connections.<sup>7</sup> It establishes intelligibility, i.e. it renders a phenomenon or a theory intelligible by emphasising certain relations in such a manner that the object of understanding gains a certain shape and is illuminated in a certain way. This presents a common denominator of all kinds of understanding and explaining which differ with respect to the factors and relations they consider relevant, and the disputation thereof constitutes the disputation of scientific methods. A particular variety of understanding connections, i.e. as understanding contexts, is presented in Wilhelm Dilthey's model which interprets the context as a context of meaning and explicates understanding as understanding meaning.

The paradigmatic object of this kind of understanding is a story; the paradigmatic framework according to which the manifold is grasped in its connectedness is the relation of parts and whole. This relation, ever since a fundamental schema of ontology, equally presents a privileged hinge between logical-ontological and hermeneutic conceptions. The interplay between part and whole is reflected in the figure of the hermeneutic circle. Understanding unfolds in their interdependence, in which the part "has meaning only in its connectedness with the whole", and "the whole only exists for us insofar as it becomes intelligible from its parts.

7 Oliver Scholz, 2016, 17–32.

Understanding always hovers between both perspectives".<sup>8</sup> Proceeding from either side, i.e. from the side of the part or of the whole, their relation illuminates aspects that are genuinely relevant for understanding.

Proceeding from the whole, the real constitution of the context at issue comes into view. Dilthey specifies it as a "context of effects",<sup>9</sup> defining it by the agency of a creating and expressing life. Coupling the relation of the whole to the part with the idea of force and its expression opens the possibility of simultaneously grasping this relation according to the relationship between the inner and the outer, the expressed and its expression, which is fundamental to hermeneutics. Life, insofar as it yields effects, expresses itself in these; as a whole, it becomes manifest in individual "objectifications of life"<sup>10</sup> that constitute the object of the human sciences. Proceeding from the other side, the part, the relation, primarily appears as a context of cognition and understanding in which it is intertwined with the category of meaning. Understanding something as a part of a whole, as an episode of a story, means grasping its significance for the whole, its function for what happens on a more comprehensive level, e.g. its functioning as the beginning, the inversion, or the completion of a project. This description of understanding converges with a hermeneutic connection by its phrasing only. Grasping something in its function for something else means presenting it in its meaning or meaningfulness for the latter: The functional relation is projected onto an epistemological relation, in which meaning is a correlate of understanding.

With respect to the original question, it remains open as to what understanding, grasped as understanding meaning, consists in, and to what extent the aforementioned reflexivity and subject-relatedness is brought to bear. Moreover, the relation between the two directions of understanding, proceeding from the whole and from the part, is still in need of explication, and so is the question as to whether and in which sense they reach beyond the circularity of mutual reference.

### 4 Sense and Meaning

Now it becomes clear that Dilthey here does not merely envision a symmetric reflection. This may seem so at the surface insofar as we understand something in the light of its larger context which we in turn interpret with respect to its ele-

8 Dilthey, 1970, 288.

9 Dilthey, 1970, 186.

10 Dilthey, 1970, 180.



ments. In some sense, this inversion is inevitable insofar as the first direction of understanding may involve several stages and is potentially open-ended: A story presenting the horizon of meaning for a particular event is understood as a part of a larger process and so forth. We can continue this interpretation as an iterating interlacing of different levels up to the vanishing point of universal history which, itself being all-encompassing, is explicable only in the reverse direction, by reference to the framework of its constitutive elements. So far, we are concerned with two complementary, oppositely proceeding implementations of understanding within the framework provided by the relation between part and whole. However, Dilthey does not content himself with this way of closing the regress. Rather, he answers the seemingly aporetic question as to how the whole ought to be understood in itself with a conceptual differentiation: He distinguishes the meaning of the part from the sense inherent in the "whole as the bearer of values and purposes".<sup>11</sup> The *meaning* refers to the relevance of a part within a whole whereas the *sense* concerns the whole as such: We understand the relevance of an episode, and the sense of a story.

Admittedly, the terminological distinction of sense and meaning itself is not very illuminating for the problem, the more so since Dilthey himself does not strictly observe it and since it has not prevailed in either everyday or scientific language (though there have been suggestions made to this effect, e.g. by Frege<sup>12</sup>). Conceptually, Dilthey connects this distinction with a differentiation concerning the temporal orientation of life. Accordingly, we grasp the *meaning* of life by *retrospective* remembering whereas, in the *present*, we experience the positive or negative *value* of things and extend to the *future* in the category of *purpose*.<sup>13</sup> That is, understanding meaning originally occurs in instances of referring to the past. Importantly, the narrowest unity of the context of life is constituted in instances of this kind of reference, whereas the various purposes and values forming our lives when relating to present and future remain separate, side by side.<sup>14</sup> Alongside its temporal form, another structural characteristic of understanding is important, which relates to the aforementioned reflexivity: the subject-referentiality inherent in understanding. The sense of history, in contrast to the meaning of its parts, does not consist in having meaning-for-something-else.

11 Dilthey, 1970, 206.

12 Frege (1898), 1980, 56–78. Frege distinguishes the meaning of a name (the object it refers to) from the sense of an expression or sentence (the way in which the object is presented), as in his famous example of the planet Venus that is presented as the morning or the evening star, respectively, depending on the time of day at which it is observed.

13 Dilthey, 1970, 248.

14 Dilthey, 1970, 248f., 292.

It is nothing but the sense of history in and for itself. The sense of history does not exceed history, but refers back to it, in a sense back into it. More precisely, the sense of history must be determined as sense-for-the-subject whereby the subject here needs not be thought of as an actual agent, but rather serves as the formal subject of reference of history. It presents what is at issue in a story and whose history is constituted in a particular course of events.

That the whole in this way refers back to the elements whose collective entirety it constitutes – as the story refers back to the subject whose story is at issue and which constitutes its identity from within the story – is, as Dilthey emphasises, an essential trait of understanding. In virtue of the connection life-expression-understanding, understanding proceeds from the part to the whole, relating the "outer, the particular event to something inner" whose expression it is. Transitioning from part to whole does not reduce to a simple process of going out, but extends to the actions of returning, going into oneself. Referring back to the inner, however, is more than structurally adjusting to the centre. It constitutes the core of a personal self-relation which, again, is a condition for the unified whole in question. The parts of a context of life belong to one another only insofar as they refer to a person, a "self", and a life, to which they "belong".<sup>15</sup> The reference to the subject in question is more than an outer reference to a subject for whom the parts are meaningful. Rather, it is a reference to a self which is realised eventually as self-reference. That the unity of the context in which sense is established and the identity of the subject are related must be conceived from an internal perspective, from the subject's point of view whose life-story is at issue.<sup>16</sup> What it is that actually constitutes the unity of the story and the sense of the whole cannot, in the end, be disclosed other than by reference to the subject's self-referentiality. Just as the subject is not isolable from its story, the form the story takes cannot be separated from the reference to the subject of the story and its self-relatedness.<sup>17</sup>

15 Dilthey, 1970, 301, 240.

16 Similarly, Heidegger relates the world's "connectedness of involvement" and the "significance" of understanding to the human being as their eventual "for-the-sake-of-which": Heidegger, 1962, §§31, 69.

17 Paul Ricœur presents the inseparability of the constitution of the subject from the story whilst simultaneously highlighting the interplay of two forms of narrative identity, which he specifies as "*mêmeté*" and "*ipséité*": Ricœur, 1985, 352–358; Ricœur, 1990, 167–180.

## 5 Autobiography and Self-Understanding

The intimate connectedness between the subject and its story constitutes the core of Dilthey's eminent thesis, which emphasises the privileged status of the autobiography: "The autobiography is the utmost and most instructive form in which we encounter the understanding of life".<sup>18</sup> The core of this connectedness is the internal entanglement of life and its reflexive self-presentation. Historical life is not exhausted by being subject to an outer process of becoming, but always takes place in the dimensions of realising, remembering and projecting oneself. (A subject's) Story and history do not proceed in separation from each other, they mutually permeate one another, as existentially reassuring oneself is not different from one's conduct of life, but an integral element of it. It is important to note that the connectedness in question is a bidirectional one and must be read as such. As life is not lived independently of becoming self-aware and orienting oneself reflexively, reflection, too, is not accomplished in separation from the internal motion and self-referentiality of life.

Dilthey emphasises this issue with respect to the logic of historiography, whose way of unifying and structuring its matter is modelled on and rooted in the way individual lives are shaped. Here, "a context has been formed in life itself" by life's integrating the multitude of particular experiences into selective structures: "That is, the work of historiography has been halfway done by life itself".<sup>19</sup> Yet, this is not only about the premises of historiography. The concept of autobiography paradigmatically stands for the irreducibility of relating to oneself in understanding. True understanding has to recognise and articulate the manifestations of life from the subject's self-referential perspective as the medium of the subject's expressing itself and giving shape to its life.

Before I come to tracing how this thought is reflected in Dilthey's theory of the human sciences, I want to extend the self-referentiality of understanding with a further step, thereby going beyond Dilthey's conception. Interlocking understanding and understanding oneself, Dilthey in substance touches considerations in existential hermeneutics which, coming from the other side, conceives of understanding as a fundamental principle of being oneself as a subject. Continuously developing a picture and an understanding of oneself and the world belongs to human life. Understanding oneself means more than formal self-reference or knowledge of one's own states and characteristics. It rather amounts to a kind of self-exploration aiming at theoretically and practically exploring and coming

to terms with oneself. The scope of its manifestations ranges from biographical remembering and searching one's conscience to psychoanalytic self-enlightenment and active self-understanding which includes projecting oneself, critically scrutinising oneself, and constructive self-formation. Human existence takes place in the dimensions of understanding and self-understanding which converge to the achievement of an understanding way of reflecting on oneself. Paul Ricoeur has articulated this basic thought as a hermeneutic of the self; Charles Taylor has shaped the phrase of human beings as self-interpreting animals; Dieter Henrich has spelled out the concept of self-understanding (*Selbstverständigung*) as the guiding idea of subjective being-oneself.<sup>20</sup> Self-understanding is both the environmental realisation of understanding and the mutual permeation of life and reflection in individual cases: It is a kind of self-understanding that is equally constitutive for as it roots in and develops from one's conduct of life.

## 6 The Objectifications of Life and the Human Sciences

The triad life-expression-understanding articulates the origin of the self-referentiality of life as well as the foundation of the human sciences. Dilthey defines their unified object as the "objectification of life".<sup>21</sup> Clearly, his theory follows the general line of Hegel's philosophy of spirit wherein the cultural-historical world presents nothing but the external realisation of spirit in the world. Dilthey's theorem of the objectification of life apparently transforms the Hegelian conception of the objective spirit. The forms objective spirit materially adopts – for instance, political institutions or the force of history – instantiate it as it proceeds from subjective interiority to manifest realisation in the world. However, the transformation between Hegel and Dilthey involves a significant shift of immediate concern for the thought developed in the foregoing.

Among the objectifications of life, Dilthey does not only count what Hegel treats as 'objective spirit', but also what he treats as 'absolute spirit'. Hegel distinguished the dimensions of arts, religion, science and philosophy from the institutions in which spirit is realised in the world as those dimensions in which spirit reassures itself and appears in its self-explication. The difference is analogous to the difference between the two uses of the word 'culture' in contemporary

<sup>18</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 246.

<sup>19</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 247.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, 1990, 27ff.; Taylor, 1985, 45–76; Henrich, 1999; Henrich, 2001; Henrich, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 177f.

language. In the broad sense used in cultural studies, 'culture' as opposed to 'nature' refers to whatever is the work of human beings, from street-building to opera. In the narrow sense, as implied by the terms 'cultural affairs' or 'department of culture', it means so-called 'high culture' as a form of presentation or reflection. We are concerned with two stages of transcending life as such: On the one hand, material externalisation as realisation and formation of life and, on the other hand, intentional expression as presentation and reflection of life. Subsuming both under the concept 'objectifications of life' and designating those as objects of humanistic understanding, as Dilthey does, plausibly converges them in both respects. For the material forms of objective spirit (such as an economic system) are comprehensible in terms of their inherent interpretations of life and, reversely, the instantiations of absolute spirit (such as a particular religion) equally adopt an institutional form in the world. In various cases, the two levels of manifestation overlap and merge into one another. Still, it is noteworthy that their functional roles differ. In one case, we are primarily concerned with actual manifestations and in the other case with instances of explication and reflexive understanding. The difference reveals where the model of expression fails to comprise all aspects of hermeneutics. The forms of spirit are more than objectifications in the sense of the manifestations of a force or the sedimentations of a (causally) effective nexus. Introducing the acts of manifesting and reassuring oneself into his concept of life-expressions, Dilthey underlines the moment of reflexivity that is not exhausted by formal self-reference, but extends to the cognitive act of disclosing and interpreting oneself. The phenomena of culture are not only expressions of life, but nodes of crystallisation in the process of human self-explication.

## 7 Double Reflexivity and Interminability of Understanding

This view exceeds the reflexive loop of understanding as it was presented in the beginning. More is at stake than the act of perceiving a certain instance of behaviour from the agent's point of view, although this certainly remains the basis and, in many cases, also the hinge of understanding. But there is more involved, in ordinary communication as well as in conducting one's life. Reflexivity is not only relevant with respect to the object, but also to the act and the subject of understanding. This becomes manifest in instances of interactive exchange in which communication can be hampered by impenetrability and obscurity on both sides, the speaker's and the hearer's. Whoever is not at peace with himself

has difficulties with understanding others and unravelling an intricate message – not for nothing is self-analysis the precondition of practicing psychoanalysis. A non-reductive explication of understanding must acknowledge the author and the reader, the speaker and the hearer as subjects who are constantly engaged in struggling with their own opacity and coming to terms with themselves. Generally, the constitution of sense which permeates the cultural world, thus making it the object of the human sciences, is a twofold reflexive and dialogical process. It involves acts of constituting and receiving sense, of producing, apprehending, interpreting and continuing contexts of sense, each of which is in need of disclosure and involves acts of self-explication.

Understanding is not simply a particular intellectual operation (such as a subsumption under a general concept, a combination or integration of elements) and not a kind of intuitively assimilating or empathising with another's experiencing either, but a kind of participating in a complex process of the reflexive constitution of sense. The human world, the object of the human sciences, is not adequately accounted for by understanding it as an assemblage of formations and sediments of life and materialisations of sense. It fundamentally presents a process, participation in which, as agents and recipients, constitutes the act of understanding and interpreting. Human life, as it proceeds within the dimension of culture, participates in this process by acting and speaking, receiving and interpreting, creating and producing. At the same time, the reflexivity of this process brings to bear its openness and infinity. Contemporary hermeneutics has emphatically called attention to this aspect of constituting sense.

The interminability of interpreting has been addressed under different aspects by authors like Ricoeur and Gadamer. It can find roots in what Ricoeur describes as the inexhaustible potential to make sense inherent to symbols, texts, and works of art that have to be experienced and apprehended, whose meaning has to be disclosed and brought into shape time and again. It can equally emerge from the infinite mediateness of understanding, from the incongruity of the frameworks of language and meaning, which remains even in most successful acts of communicating and translating, from the irreducible otherness of I and You. Not least because of the subject's remaining mediate and alien to itself, translation and communication with others never comes to an end. Gadamer has carried this insight into the constitution of sense, all the way up to the formula that his own work on hermeneutics was essentially concerned with, "rehabilitating 'malicious infinity'".<sup>22</sup> In addition, Jacques Derrida has emphasised the outward non-seclusiveness of sense and called attention to the mutual permeation

<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, 1970a, 505; Gadamer, 1970b, 8; Gadamer, 1970c, 135.



of sense, medium and material, text and context, all of which he regards as elements of never-ending, deconstructive reading.

Obviously, more contemporary authors reach beyond Dilthey's hermeneutics with regard to sounding and founding infinite understanding. It is, however, interesting in what manner they continue Dilthey's project, to what extent they take up and advance his themes. Dilthey, too, emphasises the limits of understanding that are effective in the potential infinity of every process of understanding, "which can never be realised completely".<sup>23</sup> As one reason for this infiniteness, he presents the fact that experiencing itself is "unfathomable" and that, hence, the task to illuminate and articulate it is "never-ending".<sup>24</sup> Another reason is that the claim for clearly grasping another person's thoughts is unsatisfactory because their "individual ways of combining" is not demonstrable, but at most only "divinatorily" conjecturable.<sup>25</sup> As a final and general reason, the transition from elemental understanding of utterances to spiritual understanding sense harbours various uncertainties and obscurities.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to our guiding question, those complications which are due to the pursuit of self-knowledge and self-understanding are of special interest. If experiencing and understanding oneself constitute (*are*) the basis of hermeneutics, they cannot provide their certain or transparent foundation because, as Dilthey laconically says, "we do not understand ourselves".<sup>27</sup> Yet, "a man's pondering himself" remains the "yardstick and foundation" of understanding.<sup>28</sup> It is a kind of self-pondering viewed in a certain light, as autobiographical reflection "on one's course of life",<sup>29</sup> that Dilthey considers here. It appears to him as "utmost explication" in the course of "comprehending and interpreting",<sup>30</sup> and he explains it with reference to classical paradigms in Augustine's, Rousseau's, and Goethe's works. It is a kind of negotiating one's own life by which one explores it in its guise, directedness, and value, which Dilthey explicates in its entirety in the light of historical understanding, as retrospectively becoming aware of oneself. Its complementary concept consists in prospectively projecting oneself and in finding practical orientation concerning one's own wanting and doing. A complete instance of coming to terms with oneself would involve taking

<sup>23</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 280.

<sup>24</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 277.

<sup>25</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 279.

<sup>26</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 259.

<sup>27</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 278.

<sup>28</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 251.

<sup>29</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 247.

<sup>30</sup> Dilthey, 1970, 251.

in both perspectives on one's life, the theoretical and practical, the one related to the past and the other related to the future. Both elements together constitute the reflexive momentum of the kind of understanding which, exceeding the scope of formal self-reference, means understanding oneself in one's own existence. That this constitutively belongs to the concept of understanding is one of Dilthey's fundamental insights forming the potential of his hermeneutics. The reflexivity of understanding is an essential, maybe the decisive point that is involved in determining the infiniteness of understanding and makes Dilthey's conception adaptable for later conceptions of understanding.

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Christian Bermes

## Towards a Performative Hermeneutics

### Wittgenstein and Husserl on the Understanding of Cultural Practices

**Abstract:** Following Husserl's analysis of lifeworld and Wittgenstein's discussion of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, this paper addresses the understanding of cultural practices. It proceeds on the assumption that the comprehension of cultural practices is grounded on a unique form of understanding and cannot be reduced to other types of understanding. Such a form of understanding relativizes the as-structure of classical hermeneutics to describe the pre-givenness and the commitment of cultural practices. A description that accomplishes this is called 'performative hermeneutics' in this article. It will here be shown that there is an understanding of commitments, a cultural or performative understanding, in which the as-structure does not play a primary role, but which becomes understandable only by canceling this structure.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics, understand, cultural practices, performative hermeneutics, commitment, comprehension

## 1 Hermeneutics and Understanding of Cultural Practices

Histories of reception are factually given in philosophy, but they could also be rearranged and re-enacted retrospectively. If, for instance, Wittgenstein's *Big Typescript* had been chosen as the major point of reference for any examination, Wittgenstein might have been more influential in the hermeneutical tradition. The *Big Typescript* begins with a longer passage on understanding, which is only then followed by various thoughts on meaning. Hermeneutics would thus stand prior to the theory of meaning. The same is true for Husserl. The late reflections from the 20s and 30s relativize the harsh criticism of Dilthey's hermeneutics and the so called "writers-philosophy" (*Literaten-Philosophie*) as it is brought forward by Husserl in his programmatic work *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* (*Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*). In his lecture on anthropology from 1930, Husserl calls phenomenology hermeneutics, even if he does so with a very distinct use of the term. He says: "Real analysis of consciousness is hermeneutics of the life of consciousness, so to speak" (*Echte Bewusstseinsanalyse ist sozusagen Hermeneutik*



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# Human Understanding as Problem

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